

Preparing the Latino Community for Public Health Emergencies

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Studies have found that Latinos and other minority communities are less likely to have an emergency plan, and as a whole, feel unprepared to deal with emergencies when compared to non-minority communities in the general population.¹ This data and the many anecdotal stories that surfaced after catastrophic events like Hurricane Katrina, emphasizes the importance of developing robust disaster plans that address the needs of vulnerable populations.

A Community's Response

The Latino Health Initiative of Montgomery County, Maryland and its health promotion program, *Vías de la Salud*, and the Montgomery County Advanced Practice Center for Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (Montgomery APC), in collaboration with the University of Maryland, School of Medicine—developed, implemented, and assessed a cultural and linguistic intervention to increase the awareness, knowledge, and practices of emergency preparedness among the low-income Latino community. This intervention included the development of a training curriculum, the training of health promotion specialists, and conducting community-based education sessions.

A literature review and eight focus groups provided the foundation for the development of a training curriculum for the health promotion specialists. *Vías* health promoters, volunteers of the Latino Health Initiative Program of Montgomery County, Maryland Public Health Services, were provided information on emergency preparedness in addition to instruction on how to deliver key messages and materials from the Montgomery APC's *Plan to Be Safe* campaign.

Over a two month period, teams of *Vías* promoters conducted two pilot interventions at two collaborating community agencies that serve Latinos. At each site, the promoters held educational sessions addressing “What is an Emergency?” and the three steps of emergency preparedness (initiate a conversation about emergencies; develop a family emergency plan; and prepare an emergency supply kit of nine essential items). Pre- and post-tests assessed the effects of the intervention on participants' attitudes and practices and the effectiveness of the promoter training. Next, the participants' comments and the promoters' written reports and observations were collected.

Intervention Findings

- Increased perception of participants that their families were prepared to deal with an emergency situation (from 8% at the pre-test to 69% at the post-test);
- Increased engagement in emergency preparedness activities—on the final post-test, 100% of participants reported to have discussed with their families about emergencies and the need to develop an emergency plan (compared to 23%

¹ Carter-Pokras, Olivia PhD, Zambrana, Ruth E. PhD; Mora, Sonia E.; Aaby, Katherine A. MPH. "Emergency Preparedness: Knowledge and Perceptions of Latin American Immigrants" *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, Vol. 18, Number 2, 2007, pp. 465-481.

and 33% respectively, on the pre-test);

- More than 90% of participants reported to have stored water, food, and other supplies at the final post-test;
- Participants reported that they found the sessions to be interesting, valuable, clear, and motivating; and
- Several participants indicated the need to inquire about the emergency plan at their children's schools, and to consider medication for chronic illnesses when planning for an emergency.

Overall findings suggested that most participants recognized the importance of emergency preparedness education in the Latino community. Unlike previous trainings which were overrepresented with Latina women, these pilot sessions brought in more men, many of whom shared with the *Vías* promoters that it was their responsibility, as the head of the family, to know what to do during an emergency.

Conclusion

Qualitative results of these pilot sessions suggest that the promoter-led community education trainings on emergency preparedness were remarkably effective in increasing the Latino community's readiness for emergencies. Key factors likely to have contributed to the overall success of this intervention include a carefully designed intervention (using a limited number of messages); collaboration with trusted community agencies; the skills, familiarity with the target audience and ongoing supportive supervision of the promoters; and the trust that the *Vías* promoters gained in the communities where the interventions were conducted. Programs using similar structures and processes should be able to successfully replicate the project through the use of the curriculum, related materials, and attention to other key elements of the intervention.

The Montgomery County, Maryland APC presented the *Emergency Preparedness Training Curriculum for Latino Health Promoters* toolkit at the 2009 Public Health Preparedness Summit in San Diego, California. To download the toolkit (available in English and Spanish), please visit Montgomery APC's Web site at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/apc or visit www.naccho.org/APC.